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STUDIES IN CHEERFULNESS—II.

BY MAX O'RELL.

THINGS are going to change. The time is soon coming, coming indeed at giant's strides, when babies will cease to be born with silver spoons in their mouths. No man need be afraid to be called a Utopian, a Socialist, or an Anarchist, who says that the time is coming when the legislatures of all the civilized nations in the world will be busy settling social questions; that the time is coming when every man will have to work, and when no one will be allowed to enjoy the privileges of wealth without returning some equivalent for it to the community.

That will not be the reign of Socialism, much less of Anarchism, for both systems are utterly and wretchedly wrong in that they suppress competition. Society will never be so organized that the lazy, the drunkard, the improvident, the dissolute, will have as much chance of success in life as the intelligent, the industrious, the frugal, the saving, and the generally well-behaved. No, no; the fittest will always survive, but everyone shall be offered a chance. All I say is this: A society in which the workers live in poverty, often in a state bordering on starvation, while the idlers live in unbridled luxury, I say that society is wrongly organized. All my sympathies are for those who do the work. The men who build our houses, often at the risk of their lives; the men who make the railways; the men who bury themselves in the earth, and, lying on their backs for hours in the mines, procure coal for our comfort; those men draw my sympathies much more than those who yawn in their clubs all day long, attend races, and remember their days by their utter uselessness only.

I believe that people will not be really cheerful, contented and happy so long as they know that thousands and thousands of their fellow-creatures are wringing their hands in despair.

The really cheerful and happy people in the world are those who are satisfied to be little, to do little and to know little. The only really rich people are those who are rich, not in what they actually possess, but in what they know how to do without. If you doubt it, go to a theatre, and look at the bored faces that occupy the boxes and the orchestra stalls, and at the cheerful, eager, happy ones that occupy the upper circle and the gallery. Look at the occupants of those gorgeous carriages who "do" Rotten Row or the Avenue des Acacias as in duty bound, and the happy, cheerful, orderly crowds who enjoy a Sunday afternoon in the Versailles Gardens.

I feel much more happy, comfortable and cheerful after my good, simple, every-day dinner, quietly enjoyed with my family, with my dog begging by my side, my cat perched on the top of an armchair blinking and waiting for a chance to be noticed, and my parrot suggesting a "thank you, so good for Polly"—yes, yes, much more happy than I do after a banquet or a huge *table d'hôte* dinner.

I remember one evening, at a dinner in America, I was sitting at table by the side of a minister of the Gospel. The *menu* was in length what an American *menu* is on such occasions. The swallowing and digesting of it explains the miracle of the loaves and fishes, according to a well-known negro who had been told that fifteen thousand loaves and fishes had been eaten by five people: "De miracle was dey didn't bust." In the midst of that *menu*, just before the roast viands and the famous canvas-back duck, was written "*Rum Sherbet*," which most of us had with a cigarette and a ten minutes' rest. Now, in France, we have no sherbet at such a time; but I don't say this to suggest that the Americans are wrong. Not at all; *chacun à son goût*. Full of my stupid French notions and prejudices, however, I could not help remarking to my neighbor: "How strange! an alcoholic water ice between meat dishes! What is the object?" "Well," replied the minister of the Gospel, "it cools you and it enables you to go on." I sat aghast, and said to him: "I see, it enables you to go on, and," I added, "perhaps, in the street next to this, there is some poor desolate mother with only milkless breasts to offer to a starving babe!" "Ah," he quickly retorted, "if we knew where she was, we should go to her and help her." "But," I said, "if careful enquiries were made, we should know where

she is, for she is close by and, alas, everywhere." There is enough good food wasted at the public dinners and hotel *tables d'hôte* of every large American city to feed all the hungry. Well, all I say is this: When, in thirty or forty years, we tell our grand or great-grandchildren that, at the end of the nineteenth century we took a sherbet "in order to cool ourselves so as to be able to go on," when, a few yards off, the most abject poverty was rampant, they will not believe us; at any rate, they will not believe that we were Christians. But, by that time, maybe, they will have started a new religion: the religion of Christ.

* * *

One of the causes of French cheerfulness is to be found in the settling of the land question by the French Revolution, not in the way I should like it to be, for I hold that the Earth was meant for the human race, and not for a few privileged ones, even if these few were many. Yet, for a hundred years the land in France has been marketable, with the result that we have a contented peasantry, who own their bit of land, live in it and on it, and work it themselves. If the land is not to be nationalized, at any rate it should not be meant to keep three kinds of people, landlords who do nothing for it, tenants who improve it for landlords, and laborers who starve on it. However, as it is, we have a landed proprietary, happy and contented.

Before the French Revolution the land belonged, as it does in England now, to a few dukes, marquises and earls, who, to possess it, only took the trouble to be born. Their ancestors had been given that land as a reward, some for great services rendered to King and country, others for some bellicose exploits that would probably be rewarded to-day with twenty years of penal servitude. But those worthy ancestors of our dukes, marquises and earls were not given that land for nothing; they had some duties to perform in return. In time of war they had to levy troops at their own expense for the defence of the land against a foreign invader. That was the price for their tenure of the land. Their descendants went on keeping the land, but ceased to pay for its defence, and the people found that they had to do this themselves at the price of their own starvation. The difference between the merits of those ancestors and of their descendants is well illustrated by an interesting and amusing incident in Voltaire's life.

Voltaire had taken a box at the Opera and was installed in it

with ladies, when the Duke of Lauzun, one of the worst libertines in the time of Louis XV., arrived and asked for a box. He was respectfully informed that all the boxes were taken. "That may be," he said, "but I see Voltaire in one, turn him out." In those times those things could happen, and Voltaire had to be turned out. No doubt he preferred that to being turned in-side the Bastille. He brought an action against the duke to recover the price he had paid for the box. "What!" exclaimed the advocate for the duke, "is it M. de Voltaire who dares to plead against the Duke of Lauzun, whose great-grandfather was the first to get on the walls of La Rochelle against the Protestants, whose grandfather took twelve cannons from the Dutch at Utrecht, whose father captured two standards from the English at Fontenoy, who——" "Oh, but excuse me," interrupted Voltaire in the court, "I am not pleading against the Duke of Lauzun who was first on the walls of La Rochelle, nor against the duke who took twelve cannons from the Dutch at Utrecht, nor against the duke who captured two standards from the English at Fontenoy; I am pleading against the Duke of Lauzun who never captured anything in his life except my box at the Opera." It seems to me that this is the whole thing in a nutshell. In spite of warnings coming from all sides, the aristocracy would not see what was going on around them and what was slowly, but surely, coming. The great preacher Massillon, ninety years before the Revolution, predicted the downfall of the nobles, but they took no heed. Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau, seventy years later, wrote books. The latter wrote one that was called "*The Social Contract*." The aristocracy laughed at it and called it a mere theory; but, as Carlyle once said in his own brutal way: "Their skins went to bind the second edition of that book," their land was put up to auction and the people acquired it. The aristocracy ceased to be a power in the country.

Before the Revolution, the French peasant was a sort of wild animal, dark, livid, burnt with the sun, bound to the soil, which he dug and stirred with an unflagging patience. At night he retired to his den, and fed on black bread, water and roots. No wonder that Mme. de Sévigné was able to exclaim: "These people save other men the trouble of sowing, digging and reaping, and deserve not to lack of that bread which they have grown." To-day the French peasant lives in his own cottage and cultivates

his own field. His ideal of life is the independence which is the fruit of labor and economy. He is satisfied with very little in the days of his strength, because the prospect of eating his own bread near the door of his own cottage when his strength is gone makes him happy. So he works steadily, with a cheerful wife who is a true helpmate. She knows that her husband is not a gentleman, and she does not try to play the lady. She is not "at home" once a week, and does not indulge in the high handshake. She gets up at five in the morning to feed the pigs herself, and that is why the pigs in France look cheerful, too.

* * *

France has been fortunate in possessing a writer, the greatest and most influential French prose writer of the century, Ernest Renan, who made himself the apostle of the Gospel of Cheerfulness.

Ernest Renan has often been compared to Voltaire. Like him, he was trained under ecclesiastical influence and intended for the vocation of a priest. Like him, he was vaccinated, but, somehow, it did not take. Like Voltaire, he wrote the most easy, clear, limpid, logic prose, but there the resemblance ends. Voltaire enlightened the world by his profound learning, and entertained it by his marvellous cutting wit; but Renan improved it. The sneers and sarcasms of Voltaire often excited hatred; the kind and healthy writings of Renan excited love, and made people more happy and cheerful. Both are still called atheists by the bigots, as they were in their own times, but neither of them was. It was Voltaire who uttered the famous saying that "if God did not already exist, we should have to invent Him." As for Ernest Renan, certainly his God is not the small, petty, revengeful God that some narrow-minded pigmies have created in their own image, that God who spends His time in counting the hairs on the heads of the human race, but a great, good, merciful God, the God who commands us to love one another, the God of love, mercy and charity. Ernest Renan loved humanity with all its weaknesses, even *because* of its weaknesses. He held that people are often lovable on account of a hundred little failings and weaknesses. He sometimes pitied the world, but never scolded it. He was a great, gentle, lofty spirit, the greatest thinker and scholar of his time, who thought like a man, felt like a woman, sometimes acted like a child, and always wrote like an angel. Through his

genius the world has been made better and happier. He loved man, and improved the feelings of man toward man. He taught the world to be happy by tolerance and cheerful by moderation.

Ernest Renan had no patience with the idea, prevalent among self-made men, that their accumulation of wealth confers a benefit upon the community. Being convinced that money gained must be money lost by some one else, he despised greed. A like idea of political economy is very old-fashioned, but it is still prevalent among the inhabitants of Brittany, the birthplace of Renan, and, who knows ? human opinion will perhaps come back to it one day. In the meantime, Renan claims immunity for the Bretons, those survivors of an old world, in which this harmless error has kept alive the tradition of self-sacrifice, a race perfectly unfit for commerce, and whom we find in all the professions, doctors, sailors, soldiers, writers, a happy and cheerful race.

Renan dreaded for men the idea of a luxurious life. The cost of enjoyment in age is in abstemiousness in youth. Mr. John Ruskin says that it was the paucity of toys which made him enjoy pleasures late in life. His palate is now unimpaired because, as a child, he never had more than a taste of sweets. "I am cheerful," once wrote Renan, "because, having had few amusements when young, I have kept my illusions in all their freshness."

Cheerfulness depends upon illusions, upon not too rigorously determining to see all truths in life. Even superstition feeds cheerfulness, and should not be shunned like fanaticism, which kills it. Cheerfulness depends upon having beliefs, belief in friendship, belief in all that helps to make living beautiful, and the saddest experience in life is to be deceived and thereby lose a belief or an illusion. Children are happy and cheerful because they are full of illusions, of beliefs, and of confidence.

When we are told, in the Gospel of St. Matthew, that "except we become as little children, we shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven," I am disposed to thus interpret the verse: "Except we become as little children, confident, believing and unconscious of malice, we shall not be happy in this world." When I read: "Happy are the poor in spirit, because they shall enter into the kingdom of Heaven," I feel disposed to say: "Happy are those who are determined not to know all the truths in life, because they shall be happy in this world."

Ernest Renan would say to you: "Make money that you may

possess it; but do not aim at making too much, for fear it should possess you. Money cannot buy everything. It cannot buy health, life, or love. If you were a hundred times richer than you are, you could not multiply your wants and pleasures by one hundred. You could not eat or drink a hundred times more than you do now." There is truth and philosophy in that remark of the English drunkard staggering in the gutter: "If I was the blooming Dook of Westminster, I could—not—be—more—drunk—than—I—am." Renan would say to you, Don't take life too seriously, when you are old, you will remember life with pleasure only by the hundreds of little follies you have indulged in, by the hundreds of innocent little temptations you have succumbed to. Avoid perfect people and angels of all sorts—this side of the grave. Man will never be perfect; love him with all his imperfections. Never resist impulses of generosity, they will make you cheerful, nay, healthy. They will give color to your cheeks and prevent your flesh, in old age, from turning into yellow, dried-up parchment. Come home with pockets full of presents for the children. Let them put their little hands right to the bottom of those pockets. You will be repaid, amply repaid, by their holding out their little round faces, to thank you in anticipation of what they know you have done for them. That may be cupboard love—of course it is; every love, except a mother's, is cupboard love—never mind that: if you will make up your mind not to expect too much from man, you will be satisfied with getting what you can from children.

* * *

The most real, the sweetest pleasures in life are the pleasures of poverty.

There died, in Edinburgh, a few years ago, a cheerful, happy-looking old woman, who sold sweets to the children of the Cowgate, that wretched, squalid spot of the Scottish capital. Her whole stock was worth about a couple of shillings, and she once told me that when at the end of the day she had made six or eight pence profit she was quite satisfied. Alas, there are many children, in the Cowgate, who never felt in the hollow of their hands a half-penny or even a farthing, and who, on beholding the old woman's basket full of shiny white, pink and rose candies, would throw a side glance of envy and pass on, sad and dejected, or stop a few seconds, with their fingers in their mouths. Seldom

was a child, who could not afford to pay her, allowed to pass that basket without receiving one for love. One day, coming out of school, the children looked for the old woman in vain. She was dead. At her funeral, hundreds of barefooted little boys and girls in rags followed their departed friend down the Cowgate.

When that old woman arrived at the gates of Heaven, there were more angels to meet her and take her to the throne of the Almighty than there would be for the arrival of all the dukes in Christendom. If there are social sets in Heaven, I guess that old woman is a leader of fashion among the four-hundred there—or my idea of Heaven is altogether wrong.

MAX O'RELL.